



THE NEED FOR BELONGINGNESS AND DISTINCTIVENESS: INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Divya Padalia

Department of Psychology, KNC, University of Delhi.

ABSTRACT

The social identity approach comprising of the social identity theory and its extension – the self-categorization theory is one of the most popular theories in social psychology. This paper uses the self-categorization theory (mainly) to understand individuals' motives to belong and to be distinct from the (multiple) groups they may be part of. It is concluded that self-categorization theory, though largely believed to be explaining only the need for inclusiveness, does in fact, explain much about the need for distinctiveness in individuals.

KEYWORDS: Belongingness, identity, distinctiveness, categorization, groups.

Introduction

Even though, India has been termed a 'collectivistic culture' by prominent theorists (eg. Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995), there is evidence of the presence of individualist orientation in Indians. Paranjpe (1998) observed that in the intellectual and cultural tradition of India, it is the individual, rather than the group, that has been the focus for moral responsibility regardless of the fact that their rights and obligations are tied up with their in-groups. How does one explain this worldview wherein self-seeking individualism becomes a part of the overall collectivism? How can the balance between the need to belong and be distinct be achieved?

Many researches have tried to deal with the idea of how individuals balance their need to belong to particular groups with their need to be unique and differentiated from others. This paper discusses the basic concepts that underlie the processes that motivate a person to associate himself/herself to a group or have a distinctiveness of his/her own. The above will be understood in light of the self-categorization theory, and in the process the self-categorization theory will be analysed with respect to its ability to explain a persons need to belong and be distinct at the same time. Cultural factors, specifically the role of the division of societies into individualistic and collectivistic cultures to explain how a person will behave in different context – whether he/she displays the need to belong more strongly or the need to be different - will be examined, and whether this division is really necessary to explain individual behaviour will be looked at.

From the literature, it is evident that theorists have looked at both the aspects. On one hand, Baumeister (1995) developed a hypothesis that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, lack of which is related to ill effects on well-being and health. On the other, Brewer (1991) in the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory proposed that social identity involves a compromise between two opposing needs: the need for assimilation and the need for differentiation. It is evident that the two needs have received much attention separately, however, it has been only recently that theorists have become interested in trying to articulate the interconnections between desires for *individual* distinctiveness, group belonging, and self-enhancement, and how the expression of these desires are shaped through culture (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). This paper attempts to look at the interconnection between the desire for distinctiveness and that of belongingness, from the self-categorization perspective.

The paper is divided into two major sections. The first section includes a discussion on the three main theories relevant to in this area –Need to Belong Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) and the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al, 1984). The second section contains a discussion on the strategies that one can adopt to maintain the balance between the need for belongingness and distinctiveness (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

Need to Belong Theory (NTB)

For decades, psychologists have argued that human beings are inherently driven by a desire to form and maintain interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). In Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968), the need to belong holds a place right above the basic biological and safety needs, highlighting its fundamental character. Some theorists have called this inner drive for belongingness with others, universal and it has been observed that this need becomes strongest under conditions of adversity or threat (Elder & Clipp, 1988). Research has also shown that forming and maintaining social bonds is positively correlated with happiness in life and positive life outcomes (Baumeister et al, 2003). Conversely, lack or loss of interpersonal relationships leads to negative

emotional experiences such as anxiety, depression, distress, loneliness, and feelings of isolation (Baumeister & Tice, 1990).

The need to belong theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) proposes that all human beings need social connections. It posits the need to belong should be found to some degree in all humans in all cultures, although naturally one would expect there to be individual differences in strength and intensity, as well as cultural and individual variation in how people express and satisfy the need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It also suggests that this need to belong could have an evolutionary basis, taking the example of hunting large animals, which was best done in large groups. The likely result of this evolutionary selection would be a set of internal mechanisms that guide individual human beings into social groups and lasting relationships. These mechanisms would presumably include a tendency to orient toward other members of the species, a tendency to experience affective distress when deprived of social contact, and a tendency to feel pleasure or positive affect from social contact and relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Baumeister & Leary's (1995) "belongingness hypothesis" suggests that the need to belong can, in principle, be directed toward any other human being, and the loss of relationship with one person can to some extent be replaced by any other. The theory suggests that it is fair to conclude that human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

There is enough empirical evidence for the need to belong hypothesis which illustrates that it is present even in those with an otherwise avoidant personality, even if only to some degree. In a study on avoidant individuals, who seem to be indifferent to how other people think of them, it was reported that high-dismissive participants experienced more than average levels of positive affect and state self-esteem after learning that other participants accepted them. The results suggest that dismissive avoidants do not represent a counter example to the hypothesis that all human beings have a fundamental need and desire to belong (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). Like hunger, the need to belong can be satisfied or deficient. Research has shown that satiation or deprivation can lead to differential motivations for affiliating with groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The desire to belong, therefore, may be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs to understand human nature.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) proposes that social identity involves a compromise between two opposing needs: the need for assimilation and the need for differentiation. Individuals are motivated to identify with groups that provide an optimal balance between these two needs. Optimal distinctiveness theory puts forward two motivations for intergroup bias. First, bias is motivated by the need to affirm the satisfaction derived from identification with an optimally distinct group (Leonardelli & Brewer, 2001). Second, given a certain degree of identification, intergroup bias is motivated by the need for intergroup differentiation (Brewer, 1991).

The theory argues that individuals continuously take corrective actions to maintain an optimal compromise between the need to be similar and the need to be different. One who feels too different from his or her in-group will make an effort to find commonalities between themselves and other members of the in-group by making in-group comparisons. Alternatively, one who feels too similar to a group will try to identify themselves as distinct from this in-group. When one feels sufficiently differentiated and assimilated, they reach a contented state of

equilibrium (Brewer, 1991).

Leonardelli & Brewer (2001) found evidence to support both motives for minimal intergroup bias. Consistent with the differentiation motive, a negative relationship was found between in-group satisfaction and intergroup bias for majority group members. Optimal distinctiveness theory is unique in putting forward a dual process model of intergroup bias. However, the specifics of these processes need further elaboration and testing.

Self-Categorization Theory

Self-categorization theory (Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987; and Turner, 1991) explains in detail the operation of the categorization process as the cognitive basis of group behaviour. Self-categorization theory (Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987; and Turner, 1991) elaborates the operation of the categorization process as the cognitive basis of group behaviour. The process of categorization emphasizes both perceived similarities between stimuli belonging to the same category and perceived differences between stimuli belonging to different categories. In the process of categorization, people are essentially depersonalized and perceived as prototypes of the relevant in-group. Proponents of this theory argue that our sense of who we are informed, at least in part, by the groups to which we belong. According to self-categorization theory, the more a person identifies with a salient group the more they view themselves and other group members as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype, a process referred to as "depersonalization."

Even though social categorization theory comes under the umbrella of 'social identity perspective', it is essential that one understands it by going beyond the concept of social identity. Social categorization theory encompasses not just the concept of 'social identity', but also that of 'personal identity'. According to self-categorization theory, individuals can develop two principal identities: a personal self, which includes unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves, and a collective self, which encompasses information about the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1972). According to Turner, Hogg, Oakes, and Reicher, (1987), when the salience of one identity increases, the salience of other identities will tend to subside. If individuals become more cognisant of their unique goals or qualities, which amplify their personal identity, they become less aware of the norms and standards of their social collectives. In a way, understanding the differentiation between personal and social identity that self-categorization theory explains, gives one a hint about how this theory may explain the individual's need to be different and belong to a group/others at the same time.

It was in the 1970's that the emergence of self as a source of meaning in itself started to emerge. In their uniqueness theory, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) presented accounts of people's fundamental need to see themselves as unique, differentiated beings. They cited a series of experiments demonstrating the negative consequences that might ensue when one's feelings of uniqueness is threatened. A growing body of research have started to view the need for distinctiveness as a universal drive (e.g., Brewer, 1991) with an emphasis on the distinction in how it manifests across cultures. Therefore, it can be argued that an individual uses self-categorization to frame their identity by two core human motives: the need to be unique and the need to belong.

Importance of the Context

According to Ellemers et al. (2002), "a central point of departure in the social identity approach is that the impact of social groups on the way people see themselves and others around them cannot be understood without taking into consideration the broader context in which they function" (p. 164). An individual's need to belong or be unique, are important factors in determining how they will sort their group memberships. Depending on the context, individuals could try to maintain the status quo either by trying to fit to the group in case of being excluded, or by trying to make their personal identities more salient.

Developments in the self-categorization tradition have elaborated on more immediate social contextual factors that may influence self-definitions and identity concerns (Turner, 1987). The basic assumption here is that the relevant social context determines which categorization seems most suitable to provide a meaningful organization of social stimuli, and hence which identity aspects become salient as guidelines for the perceptions and behaviour of those who operate within that context (Ellemers et al., 2002, p. 165). For example, in case of people being ostracized, they will find it more necessary than usual to try and fit in with a wider-range of people by re-defining their social identity. Thus, context will have an important effect on determining the balance between the need to be long and the need to be different.

Strategies for Resolving the Need to Belong and the Need to be Distinct

There is evidence in literature that suggests that people have a fundamental need to both belong to social groups and have a fundamental need to defend their individual identities and express their uniqueness. The challenge is to demonstrate how the balance between these two fundamental processes is maintained. Horsney and Jetten (2004) describe strategies that allow people to balance the need for group belonging and the need for differentiation without violating social identity principles. These strategies are organized in relation to two factors: level of distinctiveness (group vs. individual) and the mechanism for achieving distinctiveness (structural reality vs. perceptual framing). These range from identifying with a numerically distinct group, identifying with a group that defines itself from the mainstream, subgroup identification, perceptual enhancement of group distinctiveness, role differentiation, identifying with groups that normatively prescribe individualism, seeing oneself as loyal but nonconformist, and emphasizing one's normativeness relative to other group members (see Horsney & Jetten, 2004). These strategies, however, have received little empirical attention and need to be looked at more critically.

Empirical evidence is needed more so in the case of perceptual framing where group members perceive their social world and their place within it to optimally balance their needs for inclusiveness and for distinctiveness. Perceptual framing requires cognitive shifts and therefore the strategies under it come close to the self-categorization theory perspective. Consistent with the strategy to perceptually enhance group distinctiveness, Pickett and colleagues found that heightened needs for differentiation are associated with stronger levels of self-stereotyping (Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002) and heightened perceptions of in-group and out-group homogeneity (Pickett & Brewer, 2001).

Concluding Comments

It can be concluded that social psychological theories with their fundamental postulates about context dependent categorization and the division into personal and social identities, explains the balancing of the need to belong and need to be unique quite well. However, certain questions remain. Considering that the need to belong and also the need for distinctiveness is found to some degree in all humans in all cultures, with the individual differences in strength and intensity in place; how can cultures be labelled with terms such as 'non-conformist', 'collectivist', or 'individualist'?

REFERENCES

1. Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 497-529.
2. Baumeister, R. F., & Tice, D. M. (1990). Anxiety and social exclusion. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9, 165-195.
3. Baumeister, R. F., & Twenge, J. M. (2003). The social self. In T. Millon & M. J. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology: Personality and social psychology* (Vol. 5, pp. 327-352). New York: John Wiley.
4. Brewer, M. B. (1991). The social self: On being the same and different at the same time. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17, 475-482.
5. Brewer, M. B., & Pickett, C. L. (1999). Distinctiveness motives as a source of the social self. In T. R. Tyler, R. M. Kramer, & O. P. John (Eds.), *The psychology of the social self* (pp. 71-87). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
6. Carvallo, M., & Gabriel, S. (2006). No man is an island: The need to belong and dismissing avoidant attachment style. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 697-709.
7. Carvallo, M., & Pelham, B. (2006). When friends become fiends: The need to belong and perceptions of personal and group discrimination. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(1), 94-108.
8. Elder, G. H. & Clipp, E. C. (1988). *Combat experience, comradeship and psychological health* (pp 226-273) New York Plenum.
9. Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual review of psychology*, 53(1), 161-186.
10. Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
11. Hornsey, M. J., & Jetten, J. (2004). The individual within the group: Balancing the need to belong with the need to be different. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8, 248-264.
12. Leonardelli, G. J., Pickett, C. L., & Brewer, M. B. (2010). Optimal distinctiveness theory: A framework for social identity, social cognition and intergroup relations. In M. Zanna & J. Olson (Eds.) *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 43, pp. 65-115). New York: Elsevier.
13. Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: Van Nostrand.
14. Paranjpe, A. C. (1998). *Self and identity in modern psychology and Indian thought*. New York: Plenum Press.
15. Pickett, C. L., Bonner, B. L., & Coleman, J. M. (2002). Motivated self-stereotyping: Heightened assimilation and differentiation needs result in increased levels of positive and negative self-stereotyping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 543-562.
16. Sedikides, C. & Brewer, M. B. (2002) Individual, relational and collective self: partners, opponents, or strangers? In, Sedikides, Constantine and Brewer, Marilyn (eds.) *Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self*. Hove, UK, Psychology Press, 1-4.
17. Snyder, C. R. & Fromkin, H. L. (1977). Abnormality as a positive characteristic: The development and validation of a scale measuring need for uniqueness. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 86, 518-527.
18. Triandis, H. C. (1989). The self and social behavior in differing cultural contexts. *Psychological Review*, 96, 506-520.
19. Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
20. Williams, K. D. (2007). Ostracism. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 425-452.